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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000836

SIPDIS

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NSC FOR PHU; GENEVA FOR RMA

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TAGS: PREF PHUM PREL TH

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR URGES PROGRESS ON REFUGEE ISSUES

REF: VIENTIANE 157

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador raised U.S. concerns about refugee issues in a March 13 meeting with MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrukul. He urged the Thai to have a

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transparent and credible screening process for the approximately 8000 Lao-Hmong now in Thailand; to press the Lao to permit monitoring of returnees; and to address humanitarian concerns about the conditions of the UNHCR-recognized refugees in the immigration detention center in Nong Khai. The Ambassador sought MFA assistance on streamlining North Korean processing, and in permitting two Burmese labor activists to go to the US. The Permsec explained that the Lao government rejected any third-country resettlement of Hmong from Thailand, but would consider allowing Hmong to resettle elsewhere if they first returned to Laos. We do not see this as a workable solution and will continue to press the Thai to provide protection and permit resettlement for genuine refugees. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) During a March 13 meeting with MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrukul, the Ambassador raised U.S. concerns about the approximately 8000 Lao-Hmong in Petchaboon and Nong Khai seeking third-country resettlement as refugees. Virasakdi gave the most detailed and, we think, candid read-out we have gotten so far of the RTG's discussions with the Lao during the Thai foreign minister and prime minister visits to Laos last month. Virasakdi highlighted the positive side of the discussion first, saying that the Lao had begun to show some flexibility, and would consider, on a case-by-case basis, permitting third country resettlement for some of the Hmong,

YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

¶3. (C) However, Virasakdi then clarified that the Lao side had insisted that no Lao citizens could leave for third country resettlement directly from Thailand. He complained that the Lao military in particular took a hard line on this issue. If any third country wanted to resettle Lao-Hmong, they should contact the GoL, according to Virasakdi; the refugees in question would have to return to Laos first in order to be issued travel documents. The Lao government told the Thai that they had a processing center not far from

Vientiane, where they would consider third country resettlement cases. The Lao want the refugees to return to Laos so they can question them to find out who is persuading them to leave Laos. The Lao were concerned that their citizens were being misled, Virasakdi said, paying traffickers (3000 baht or nearly usdols 100) to join the underground movement to Thailand in the hopes of resettlement to other countries. Virasakdi said that the French were already working with the Lao along these lines, as they had a group they wish to resettle (reftel).

¶4. (C) Reflecting some frustration over this issue, Virasakdi asked the Ambassador whether the US would be able to resettle the Hmong from the Petchaboon camp. He suggested that the Congress enact legislation to permit the US to resettlement Hmong directly from Laos, asking, "Why not take all the Hmong?"

¶5. (C) On the Nong Khai detainees (about 152 UNHCR-recognized refugees, over half of them children), Virasakdi said that the Thai tried to convince the Lao to allow third-country resettlement for this group, but the Lao refused. The Lao reportedly claimed that, if the Nong Khai group is resettled, none of the 8000 in Petchaboon will agree to return to Laos. Virasakdi predicted that those in Nong Khai would be the last group whose status would be resolved. We pressed on the living conditions in Nong Khai, and asked if the group could not be moved to somewhere more appropriate. Virasakdi said that the Immigration Department had jurisdiction over this group and had not allowed them to be moved. However, as there was a new Immigration commissioner, MFA could try again, working through NSC (which also would have new leadership soon).

MONITORING MECHANISM

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¶6. (C) Virasakdi said the Thai side pressed the Lao to accept some kind of monitoring mechanism, suggesting IOM (as the Lao have already rejected UNHCR.) The Lao told the Thai they would consider this matter, but pointed out that embassies in Vientiane were already able to visit the returnees. The Permsec said that he tried to get the Lao to understand that the international community had an interest in this issue, but the Lao side continued to emphasize that it was a bilateral issue only, between Laos and Thailand. During PM Samak's February visit, Virasakdi said, the Lao side questioned why other countries "interfered" in the issue.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador urged the Thai to ensure that there was a monitoring mechanism in place before there were further returns. Virasakdi said that this would be difficult, as the Lao want the issue settled within a year. (Virasakdi seemed to imply that the discussions on a monitoring mechanism could be protracted.) The Ambassador underscored the need for a transparent screening process that met international standards.

NORTH KOREANS

¶8. (C) The Ambassador reviewed the status of our North Korean processing. He pointed out that, contrary to some expectations when we first sought permission to resettle North Koreans from Thailand in 2006, there had not been a huge wave of these refugees seeking to go to the US. Now that it was clear that there would not be large numbers of North Koreans to deal with, we asked if there were not some way to streamline the procedures for this group so that it would not require high-level attention at each stage of the processing. Virasakdi said he was willing to consider this, but pointed out that the two other organizations involved in these cases, the Immigration Department and the National

Security Council, were both getting new leadership right now, so the timing was not good now to try to introduce new procedures. Virasakdi pointed out that the MFA had always cooperated with us on these cases.

HIGH-PROFILE BURMESE

¶9. (C) We explained that the processing from the camps along the Burma border was going very well, and we enjoyed good cooperation with Thai officials on this issue. Virasakdi expressed surprise at the large number of Burmese refugees resettled last year (over 11,000) and was pleased to hear that the program should continue at a similar level this year. The Ambassador noted that we had also just resettled three Burmese monks who had fled Burma following the government crackdown last year, and expected to resettle a number more who had recently completed the necessary Thai government review (through the Provincial Admissions Board in Tak province.) Unfortunately, we were not having similar success in processing two Burmese labor activists who had been invited to testify before the Congress at the end of this month. We sought MFA's assistance in securing the necessary exit permission for them. Virasakdi took the information and promised to look into it. (Note: MFA Americas DG Nongnuth subsequently told us that she would contact the governor involved and try to get the case resolved. End note.)

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The Permsec's candid read-out of the state of Lao-Thai negotiations tracks with what Embassy Vientiane has heard (reftel): the GoL is, so far, insisting that all the Hmong return to Laos before being considered for third country resettlement. We do not see this as a workable solution and will continue to press the Thai to respect international norms and ensure the protection of genuine refugees. It would help if Secretary Rice were to briefly raise this issue with Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon during his March 20 call on her, in the context of thanking him for the historic Thai generosity to refugees.

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